DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 179 123 HE 011 314

AUTHOR Giamatti, A. Bartlett
TITLE The Private University and the Public Interest.
PUB DATE 15 Mar 79
NOTE 13p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College Role; Federal Aid; Federal Regulation; Financial Support; General Education; *Government School Relationship; *Higher Education; Interinstitutional Cooperation; *Liberal Arts; *Private Colleges; Student Needs

ABSTRACT

Issues facing the private university and educational needs of students are considered. There is a need for the government and universities to develop mutual understanding. Private institutions want to be self-reliant but have had to depend increasingly for financial and research aid from the government. The government understands little about the nature of private educational institutions. The private institution cannot be dealt with like profit-making corporations, big labor, or armies. Private (and public) higher education institutions are becoming one of the most heavily regulated parts of American society. The push for vocationalism early in the student's life is detrimental to developing a civic sense and to freely educate oneself. It is stressed that a liberal education with a required curriculum can help develop students who can make rational, humane, informed choices. (SW)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
A. Bartlett Giamatti
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED179123

HEW Speech
March 15, 1979

The Private University and the Public Interest

I come before you this morning neither to petition nor to promulgate. I have no new strategy, no new complaint for an old problem or old balm for new wounds. I come as your guest, neither an adversary nor an appointee of the Government. I am an unanointed, lay advocate of the private university. My institution is one of them -- by no means the largest, not at all the richest, certainly not the most humble. I am devoted to it, and to places like it, large and small, ancient and modern. I now pass much of my time pondering the futures of such private educational institutions, and the savage pressures that will shape those futures -- the pressures of inflation, of demographic decline, of the atrophied opportunities for younger faculty.

To that Homeric catalogue of pressures (I have named only the flagships) I wish today to mention another, and to explore its lineaments. It is really a simple irony, forged of all the pressures. In the next difficult years, those private institutions most dedicated by tradition and mandate to spur the young to public interest will be forced to become the newest special-interest group. To convince sources of public support to support them, for the greater good, they will have to plead even more for their private concerns. They will be driven to it by the will to survive.

And yet does one really want to see it happen? Does one really want to have places of private higher education sustain civic values and necessary

HE 011 314

© 1979

basic research; teach the young, and give them a sense of the past so that they may help make the future; continue, in innumerable ways, to reflect and serve the broad interest of the public, only by behaving essentially in a less and less publicly spirited way? And yet if a liberal education, and a liberalized professional education, open for the many in the service of all, is to be fostered, then it will only be if such institutions become better at applying, and applying for, special pressure.

Some will rejoice at the spectacle, for a variety of reasons, but such glee will have much more bile than bouyancy in it. It will be mean-spirited glee, and it will avail nothing. For choice is essential to a free society, and choice is reduced to mere chance when survival becomes a function of the amount of pressure one can apply to government. In a society that believes in pluralism, of institutions as well as values, it will be a significant loss when the private impulse to the public interest will only be sustained by the constitution of special-interest forces. Any system that asks for and rewards fragmentation cries for its own dissolution.

Private universities would not have it so. They want to be self-reliant, responsive to their traditions, responsible to the larger society. Those strands are, historically, the toughest, most resilient threads in their fabric. And the larger society, while wary of them, has always wanted such institutions to flourish, if for no other reason than it wanted the leadership that came from them, and more recently has come to depend upon the goods that flow

from research in them. The larger society has always wanted access to private institutions and it has access to the best of them. Their quality has become part of the national hope. America wishes to think of such private institutions as crucial, though it threatens, through its government, to treat them as if they were public instrumentalities. We should all clearly understand that nothing could be less in the public interest.

The problem is that despite what private universities desire and aside from what the nation requires, such places will have to depend increasingly for financial and research aid upon government. That is why such places will be forced to become more adept at pressuring for their principles. And as they do, what will come clear is not that they have gotten their hands dirty, or wrists slapped, or that they have entered the "system." What will be clearer and clearer to those on all sides who care is how little government understands the nature of private educational institutions.

Of course, the fault for that is not really government's. Private colleges and universities have never adequately educated government, or any number of other segments of society, in the nature of educational institutions, whether public or private, while it is the nature of government to assume that all institutions in a society ought to look like governments. In America, government is accustomed to dealing with itself, with industrial facilities, profit-making corporations, commercial enterprises, big labor, armies. Educational institutions are like none of these. They are built differently, for a different

set of purposes, with different histories. They cannot write off losses; they cannot pass all costs along to the consumers; they do not have "tables of organization" that initiates in such mysteries would recognize as legitimate. They cannot readily shift workers from one part of the plant to another. They do not hire or fire their employees as other institutions do because not all their employees are employed as people are everywhere else. They do not draw their talent from uniform pools in the society, nor are they meant to, nor should they. When colleges and universities are treated by others as if they were like any of these other organizations, they complain -- bitterly, brilliantly -- but they have a difficult time explaining. Of course, they are themselves by no means all alike, even though they look like nothing else.

In dealing with private colleges and universities (and with the rest of the not-for-profit sector), government can and does deal by analogy with other parts of our industrial society. But these analogies spring only from bureaucratic necessity, not from intimate experience, and they often do not work. Thus, the reality: while private (and public) institutions of higher education become one of the most heavily regulated parts of American society, they gnaw at the hand that feeds them more and more, and more and more are they repelled by the implications of their needs. Thus, their dilemma: believing they must remind the young, and the nation, of larger concerns than simply the self, they embrace contradiction and plead, scold and threaten more and more for themselves. They become the nodes of self-

interest they inveigh against. You are, of course, watching it happen at this moment, and it is neither a pretty sight nor pleasant sensation.

The government in a democracy ought to communicate its limits. A free society must not wish to over control the very process by which its young learn how valuable and irreplaceable its freedoms -- of merit competing, of choice and belief and speech -- are. The process by which those values and others are learned is the educational process. And that process has a deep and abiding purpose, which government shares and should not wish to deter, which is the shaping of citizens.

I say that because I believe how we choose to believe and speak and treat others -- how, in short, we choose a civic role for ourselves -- is the basic purpose to an education in a democracy. The content, the data, the information, of schooling can be anything in the wide world. But the purpose of education, as opposed to information, is to lead us to some sense of citizenship, to some shared assumptions about individual freedoms and institutional needs, to some sense for the full claims of self as they are to be shared with others. For some, I may have a much too old-fashioned sense of the civic claims of education and an insufficient regard for the social claims. But I would argue that without an ethically-based, civic sense, nourished in an individual through education, larger social claims issue merely into programs for action with no controlling perspective about what the action is for. Action without a deeper purpose is useless; it is only activity and

that is always finally susceptible to the sweet, solipsistic allure of anarchy. Historically, education is the best stay against such confusion, by fostering the civilizing ability to make choices and to act responsibly for others on the basis of those choices.

I think it is critical to affirm again the civic goal of an education and the way that goal is attained through choice in the educational process. It is important to say again that through individual choices, not by slogans or shibboleths or shamanistic incantation, we become engaged in common concerns. It is important to say it now, I believe, because now powerful forces press young people and their parents and schools in a quite opposite direction. Away from an education concerned at heart with ethical choice and civic effort and toward a view of schooling as immediately, intensely, insistently useful.

I am not alone in feeling everywhere a deep ache to redefine everything in terms that serve only the self rather than in terms that shape the self with a civic sense for others. Much of this mood derives from the straitened economic conditions in the country, conditions that only encourage in young people (and in their parents) the need to define at the beginning of adult lives an ultimate vocation. This grinding and pressing vocationalism is not the students' fault; they hear nothing else from parents or national leaders or any of the rest of us but of the hard times ahead and of how bleak it looks and how the dollar plunges and unemployment soars and, as the century

winds down and the millennium nears, of how many promises have been broken and how the glass of all our hopes is shattered; and as they remember the battles of their older sibiings in the sixties, over telephones, in living rooms, by mail, on police blotters, in emergency rooms, they resolve not to cause that kind of family civil war or bear the scars in their genes and generation; and as places like Yale (and others) break past $8,000 a year for the privilege of working hard and competing harder, they look at a younger brother or sister who will not even dream of such a place unless indebtedness is to become as ingrained in the middle class as self-loathing is.

When the young person of eighteen looks at and listens to and remembers all this, there is little wonder they seem, to the newly nostalgic, to be so "changed," to be so "apathetic," so unlike the flower children no one really approved of, until they withered away. It is small wonder that students now seem to embody everything their Fifties-formed parents want for them. It is no wonder that Farrah Fawcett-Majors was so completely displaced by John Belushi on the wall of every middle-class teenage room in America. The poster iconography for today's young student is not the anodyne remnant of some earlier promise, smiling a smile so dazzling that it almost hides the fact there is nothing to smile at. Much more to the point, and more powerful, is the sullen, unshaven face of the hero of Animal House, glancing sidelong, wary, gross, and strong.

The vocationalism, the urge to be professional early so as to have

something later, is lamentable, understandable and manageable. There is no point in making students feel guilty about it, or in pretending that work in the world is beneath them, or in flaying today's student because he is not yesterday's, living in a van in Vermont. The vocationalism is not necessarily either wrong or foolish -- if its pragmatism can be pointed, if that pragmatism can be attached to a purpose and that purpose to other people, in some substantial way, and to larger purposes. The dangerous and debilitating vocationalism is the one that higher education, fearing for survival, is tempted to pander to rather than to pattern: a vocationalism that is merely self-regarding, that only narrows someone at eighteen down to anxiety about a job, that leaves him or her only with ambition but no affiliations. That vocationalism strangles the power of choice in the name of necessity and cripples the urge to a flexible civic sense when that sense ought to be gathering soundness and strength. Such a willful vocationalism, urged on the young person so early and often, lacks the capacious spirit through which freely to educate oneself for a life of some benefit to others.

It is that vision of self, in precisely the least promising of times, that educational institutions, at whatever level, must assert again, for they, like government, ought to assert their limits. It must be said that school cannot save all souls, cannot serve all the needs of society, cannot do everything that governments and churches and families and strong traditions must also do. But, in the least promising of times, schools, especially institutions

of higher education, can affirm that there is no specialization in a democracy unless there is first a broad, deep base of shared assumptions and perceptions, growing out of a carefully wrought curriculum, about where we have come from and what that pluralism of values and backgrounds and peoples had as a purpose, and how important is the unity in and through that diversity. While it may feel as if we are re-inventing the wheel at a time when everyone wants to go by Concorde, it is precisely now that the values, and value, of a liberal education must be asserted again, a liberal education whose intellectual core is a required curriculum and whose purpose is the development of students who can make rational, humane, informed choices, and citizens.

And in the teeth of the forces that buffet them, private universities must assert again what they are: how they embody the principle of collaborative effort, how they are built of affiliations, of courses and appointments and research efforts and values. They must communicate to others their nature, which is their connectedness within and their complex connections without. They must assert their fragility and toughness, their combination of susceptibility to every seismic quiver in the society and their insistence that they determine for themselves what quality is and how it is tested and tried and proven. Private universities cannot be diffident about their artificial, curiously hierarchical nature or their essentially intellectual and civic purpose. They must be able to persuade others that the ability to pursue the truth responsibly and freely is a precious charge and a national asset and that responsibility

and freedom are not incompatible desires or goals. Universities must be able to explain how they are part of a larger vision a society must set for itself -- of a mutually supportive and candidly respectful culture where pluralism is ordered so that it can be nourished and diversity is defined as a good. Universities cannot believe, lest they lie to themselves, that they alone contain this vision, but they cannot be forced to compromise their vision, lest society lose one of its central modes for seeing.

A government's need to impose responsibility and a university's need to inquire freely must exist together in a complex, delicate and trustful balance; government and private universities must learn about each other's needs and natures in order not to maul and manipulate each other. If quality is to be maintained for the country's good, then there must be recognition on both parts that neither part gains from forcing the other to its mold or model.

There is another form of recognition that must also occur, and that takes me back to where I began. At the outset I asserted that survival would force private universities, particularly with regard to the government, to become a new special-interest group, and I said that need would contravene something deep in their natures. In fact, neither public government nor private institutions can exist for or sustain narrowly defined special interest. In fact, governmental and educational institutions, and the processes they stand for, are meant to serve, in different ways, the same public interest

and public trust and, in fact, both kinds of institutions choke on special pressures. We share not only an ironic relationship but a much larger common problem, which is how to deal with the country's rush to define issues only in terms of constituencies rather than in terms of commonalities.

There is in America a retreat from structures of mutuality to strategies for special accommodation, and neither government nor education, neither agencies nor universities, can survive by simply spinning off special solutions or by making oneself into a special-interest group. Any institution that responds only to localized, political pressure and not to broader claims of civic principle splits its polity and fragments itself.

America is in danger of overloading its political system, and hence, in ways we have not yet fully realized, its various educational systems. It asks each to bear too much. The political system, where competing needs must be recognized and assessed, cannot function when every need presents itself as an Absolute Imperative and thus refuses to recognize that other claims could possibly compete. Such a spirit of absolutism renders the political system incapable of the civilizing flexibility that a democracy needs. And when that spirit of special, as opposed to public, interest enters the campuses, a different system is just as incapacitated. The educational system's instincts for equity and the educational institution's collaborative structure are threatened at their core.

A private education must be in some form directed to the public good,

and nothing is gained from assuming that private universities and colleges do not want to, or cannot, fulfill that purpose. A private university meets its social obligations by giving young people of ability from the widest possible variety of backgrounds and energies and talents the opportunity to educate themselves and to be educated for the full claims of citizenship. The self-reliance of such institutions and individuals must be encouraged, not eroded. Private universities must be nourished in order that they may continue to be tributaries to the great stream of American culture and not forced to become sanctuaries from it. Rather than assuming that the private sector, including universities, is incapable of assuming a civic role, it is in everyone's interest to listen and learn from the other and to cherish the powerful pluralism, and all it implies; that is the unique instinct and strength of our country.

I said I came neither to petition nor to promulgate. I come to propose: the proposition is a simple one. It is that it is finally in the public interest that we, government and university, serve that interest as generously and supportively as possible, and that means understanding each other's particular mission and respecting the different paths to a common end.